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Sermon: January 1, 2012

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, I bring you grace and peace from our Lord and Savior Jesus – the baby in the manger who brings new life, new hope, and grace for the journey. Amen

We have just journeyed through one of my favorite seasons of the church year –and into the next. I love the season Advent. It's one of my favorites because it is a season of expectancy – expectant with hope, light, possibility – it is a season of waiting and watching and wondering about what God is up to in the world – about what Christ's coming again will mean – about what Christ's birth into the world does to you and for you. And I loved the words we sang each week as we lit the Advent candles . . . “we come, we cry, we watch, we wait, we look, we long for you . . .” But what I also love about the season is that while we are expectantly waiting, Mary and Joseph are journeying – moving ever nearer to the place of Jesus' birth

And then on that silent night, holy night – even amidst the chaos of this world, the trouble in our own lives and spirits, there is this moment of transcendent glory – where the light of Christ truly seems to break in and lighten our darkness, calm our souls, comforts our hearts, and bless the world. And I always wish we could hang on to that moment – forever. But even while we rest in that peace – there are others who are on the move – the angels journey to earth to tell of the good news – the shepherds journey to the stable to see the babe in the manger – and the wise men head out – following a star.

And for all of the characters and the players in the Christmas story – the journey does not end in Bethlehem – but it takes the shepherds back to their villages, the wise men to journey back home by a different road – Mary and Joseph leave for the far away place of Egypt in order to protect their son from Herod's killer ego, and then they journey to Nazareth where Jesus will grow and become a man. The journey continues for them all – and also for us.

For many reasons – though we are still in the season of Christmas - we cannot stay in Bethlehem – we cannot simply bask in the light of the Christ's child birth forever – rather - life and time move forward – and on this first Sunday after Christmas and on New Year's Day - we – here at Lord of Life – maybe understand this better than we would like to have to understand it. For just days after Christmas – we all received new news – news that maybe left some of us grieving, some angry, some sad, some hopeful for what's next, some weary of change. In a letter to the congregation Pastor Darrell announced that he would be resigning from his call at Lord of Life Lutheran Church after 22 years of faithful ministry in this place. It is time for his journey to take him to a new place - a call to be the senior pastor at First Lutheran Church in Aitkin.

So the question for today and for the days and months to come is this, “What will Lord of Life's journey look like now?”

Beverly and George Thompson are authors of a book entitle Grace for the Journey – a book dedicated to helping congregations through what they call “in-between times.” And when a congregation finds itself in one of those “in between times” they lift up a few things that are ever so important to remember – and I want to share a couple of them with you this morning. The first

is this – ***every congregation has a unique calling of its own. Just as Pastor Darrell has been called to a new adventure in ministry – so congregations are called to a certain kind of ministry – at a certain time. In what will soon be the “in between time” we claim the promise that God has called Lord of Life into a powerful and effective ministry of truth and grace – word and sacrament and God’s call upon this church does not waiver – it may just take a new or different shape in the future.

The second piece of wisdom to hang onto is that “in-between times” can be and are a gift – a distinct opportunity to develop deeper spiritual awareness of God’s call on our communal life – God will use this time to help us imagine how our own past might influence God’s call today and into the future – it is an opportunity to dive deeper in our trust and love of God. This is something that can’t be rushed.

Thompson writes, “Responding to God’s call is not always easy or clear, and the time when we find ourselves in transition can cause us to shudder. We feel like children in the backseat asking, “Are we there yet?” We just want to get to the next destination. Yet our journey of faith remains just that – a journey, one that is filled with promising in-between times. . . . In order to move from what feels like chaos to hope and possibility – people in the midst of transitions need a “Holding environment” – a safe place to be” A safe place where voices may be heard and next steps for the journey may be explored.”

Finally – the Thompson’s lift up the importance of standing together – in the unknown- in the “in-between” - resisting the temptation to keep everything the same – or to return to the way things were – and certainly resisting the temptation to make something happen NOW. God’s preferred future is awaiting us – and will be born in us – in time.

And so – as we gather on the first day of the year – with new news of change and transition in our heads and hearts – with all that it will mean to enter into this “in between” time as a church – and considering all that is undoubtedly stirring in your own heart and mind this day – I want us to take some time – and do a little bit of writing and reflecting – take out the half sheets you were handed on your way in to worship this morning. Name in the quietness of this sacred space the hopes and the fears you have for the coming year – then after you have come forward to receive holy communion – you can place your hopes and fears in the manger – trusting that the Christ child – the light of the world – will hold them all and will hold us too.

[writing time]

I wish I wasn’t always so surprised when I look back and see how God has been working in my life or in the churches life – but the other day – when I was reading Pastor Darrell’s letter for the 3rd or 4th time – and he was describing our journey of faith as one in which we are held in the hands of a loving shepherd – it occurred to me – maybe Darrell knew it – or maybe God knew we needed to hear over and over again this fall that we are safe in the hands of Jesus. Think about that – we heard it in the scriptures, we sang that truth in different words and melodies each week, we proclaimed it from the pulpit and trusted it to be true – that we are safe in the hands of Jesus. Can we trust it now – today – on this first day of the new year – with a year of unknowns

and possibilities ahead of us – a year of wondering and searching – a year of becoming and growing?

Dear friends, soon we will have to leave the Christmas season – leave Bethlehem and join the journey – the journey to a new place – a journey blessed with grace. For journey I offer this prayer – a prayer that Pastor Darrell has prayed time and time again – when this congregation set out on new adventures . . .

Let us pray, "Lord, God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."